DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 357 466 EA 024 889

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TITLE	Systemwide Education Reform: Federal Leadership Could Facilitate District-Level Efforts. Testimony before the Subcommittee on Elementary, Secondary, and Vocational Education, House Committee on Education and Labor.
INSTITUTION	General Accounting Office, Washington, D.C. Div. of Human Resources.
REPORT NO	GAO/T-HRD-93-20
PUB DATE	93
NOTE	12p.
AVAILABLE FROM	U.S. General Accounting Office, P.O. Box 6015, Gaithersburg, MD 20884-6015 (first copy free, additional copies $1 each, payable to Superintendent of Documents).
PUB TYPE	Legal/Legislative/Regulatory Materials (090) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Educational Change; *Educational Improvement; Elementary Secondary Education; *Federal Government; Government Role; *Government School Relationship; *School Restructuring; Systems Approach

ABSTRACT

Testimony on the role of federal leadership in facilitating district-level reform efforts is offered in this report, which focuses on four districts with many years of participation in systemwide educational reform. Five key components of systemwide reform are identified: standards for all students; curricula tied to those goals; high-quality instructional materials; professional development; and student assessments tied to the curricula. The four districts had undertaken systemic reform, with a focus on setting curricula-related standards for all students at each grade level. The districts shared the following implementation experiences: (1) systemwide reform is a longterm process; (2) technical assistance and teacher support are important; (3) overall progress toward high standards is difficult to assess; and (4) current federal systems may not support systemwide reform. A conclusion is that, for many districts, state and federal actions are needed to maintain commitment and find resources for reform. Establishing voluntary national standards is a first step, which should be accompanied by Congressional action to create awareness of promising reforms, provide professional development opportunities, and offer technical assistance. (LMI)

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United States General Accounting Office

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Testimony

Before the Subcommittee on Elementary, Secondary, and Vocational Education
House Committee on Education and Labor

For Release on Delivery
Expected at 10:00 a.m., EDT
Tuesday, May 4, 1993

ED357466

SYSTEMWIDE EDUCATION REFORM

Federal Leadership Could Facilitate District-Level Efforts

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
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GAO/T-HRD-93-20

SUMMARY OF TESTIMONY BY LINDA G. MORRA
SYSTEMWIDE EDUCATION REFORM
FEDERAL LEADERSHIP COULD FACILITATE
DISTRICT-LEVEL EFFORTS

Even after a decade of reform, our schools still need help. Many educators and policymakers now believe that to significantly improve student learning the education system as a whole must be changed. Systemwide reform includes five key components: (1) goals or standards for all students, (2) curricula tied to those goals, (3) high-quality instructional materials, (4) professional development, and (5) student assessments tied to the curricula. Attention is also being focused on setting high standards, including such skills as complex reasoning and problem solving. Efforts are underway at the national and state levels to develop voluntary standards and related assessment systems. Systemwide reform can be a long-term process requiring substantial commitment and effort. We believe that Congress could facilitate district efforts to undertake such reforms.

DISTRICTS WE VISITED HAD UNDERTAKEN SYSTEMWIDE REFORM. The four districts had developed standards for all students at each grade level that included a vision of what students needed to know when they graduated. These standards provided a focus for decisions about all other elements of the system. Student assessments related to the district curricula were a key part of the instructional reform. When evidence showed progress was not sufficient, districts made changes to improve learning.

COMMON THEMES IN REFORM IMPLEMENTATION. The experiences in these districts provided several key insights into the process of systemwide reform. First, systemwide reform was a long-term process, requiring vision and commitment. Second, technical assistance was important in developing and carrying out the reforms. Third, teacher support was critical. Fourth, assessing overall progress toward high standards may be difficult. Finally, current federal programs may not support systemwide reform.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FEDERAL ROLE IN FOSTERING SYSTEMWIDE REFORM. Having key components of the education system linked together promotes monitoring of student achievement to ensure that progress continues and enables all school personnel to work together to improve student performance. However, without state and federal actions, maintaining commitment and finding resources for systemwide reform may be difficult for many districts. Voluntary national standards could provide a starting place and direction for districts undertaking reform. But national standards and assessments alone are not likely to ensure widespread reform. Congress could take a variety of steps--in addition to supporting voluntary national standards--if it wishes to encourage districts to undertake systemwide reform. Among other things, Congress could help ensure that districts are aware of promising reforms, can provide sufficient professional development, and have the assistance they need to develop and implement reforms.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

We are pleased to be here today to discuss our report on systemwide education reform requested by the full committee and this subcommittee.[1] Even after a decade of reforms, our schools still need help. Twenty years of data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress show that our present education performance is low and not improving. For example, less than 10 percent of 17 year olds demonstrate the skills associated with the ability to function in more demanding jobs or to do college work, such as carrying out multiple-step problems, synthesizing information, and drawing conclusions. Also, gaps in achievement between minority and nonminority students are still wide.[2]

The 1980s saw a host of education reforms. But those reforms largely addressed individual parts of the system, such as merit pay for teachers, smaller class sizes, and an increased number of academic credits for graduation. Many educators and policymakers now believe that to improve student learning the education system as a whole must be changed. Attention is being focused on change designed to improve student outcomes by determining what students should know and be able to do, and ensuring that all the key components of the educational system are directed to achieving those outcomes.

My testimony today will focus on four districts that have had many years of experience with systemwide reform. They differ in size, spending level, poverty level, and approach, yet their experiences offer insight into the potential federal role in systemwide reform. In these districts, systemwide reform has been a long-term, ongoing process that requires substantial commitment and effort. We believe there are steps Congress can take if it wishes to encourage the nation's 15,000 school districts to undertake systemwide reform. Let me expand on these findings.

BACKGROUND

Systemwide reform includes five key, interrelated system components: (1) goals or standards expected of all students, (2) curricula linked directly to those standards, (3) high-quality instructional materials appropriate to the curricula, (4) professional development to enable teachers and other educators to understand the curricula and the most effective instructional

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[1]Systemwide Education Reform: Federal Leadership Could Facilitate District-Level Efforts (GAO/HRD-93-97, April 30, 1993).

[2]Ina V.S. Mullis, Eugene H. Owen, and Gary W. Phillips, America's Challenge: Accelerating Academic Achievement, Educational Testing Service (Sept. 1990).

approaches, and (5) student assessment systems that are based directly on the curricula.[3]

The standards are the driving force in these reforms. They define what students should know and be able to do, and they apply to all students. A growing consensus exists that high standards, incorporating "higher order" skills related to complex reasoning and problem solving, should be set. Efforts are under way on a variety of fronts to develop high national standards. The mathematics standards issued by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics in 1989 have become a model for other efforts, such as those sponsored by the Department of Education and professional organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English. Many states are also working to develop these types of standards.

These state and national standards, and related assessment systems, are meant to encourage reform and provide a direction for it. They will present broad frameworks of what students should know in specific subjects. Local educators would have considerable flexibility in using the standards, for example, in adding content to reflect local needs and in detailing curricula. Proposed legislation, among other things, includes provisions for developing national standards for what students should know and be able to do.

THE DISTRICTS WE VISITED HAD UNDERTAKEN SYSTEMWIDE REFORM

The districts we visited had developed standards for all students at each grade level that included a vision of the types of knowledge, skills, and abilities students need when they graduate. This provided a focus for decisions about all other elements of the system: curriculum and instruction, professional development, and assessment. We saw in these districts a clear focus on learning and a willingness to make changes, either in individual teacher approaches or in district policies, to help students achieve.

Three of the districts began reform in the 1970s or early 1980s and established standards related primarily to basic skills and raising achievement test scores. Each district had been working for several years, however, to incorporate high standards into its system in key subject areas, such as mathematics and reading. The standards issued by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics were being used extensively in three districts.

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[3]These components of "systemwide" reform are often discussed in the literature in the context of "systemic" reform, which addresses an even broader view of the education system. See, for example, Marshall S. Smith and Jennifer O'Day, "Systemic School Reform," Politics of Education Association Yearbook 1990, p. 233-267.

Student assessments related to the districts' curricula were a key part of the instructional reform. Student progress in achieving the standards was monitored frequently. In one district, for example, students were assessed four to six times a year on tests designed to monitor progress toward the district standards; these tests supplemented other information teachers used to make judgments about each student's progress. The purpose of these tests was to focus attention on students who needed assistance. Results were provided quickly so that teachers could follow up with individual students as necessary. This focus on student achievement also led to a change in the role of the principals, who became "instructional leaders." They focused more on helping teachers teach and students learn and less on their more traditional role of administrator.

When test scores or other indicators showed progress was not sufficient, districts made changes in curricula and instruction. For example, after several years, one district recognized that students' scores in math and science were not rising to the extent anticipated. Officials revamped their curricula and assessments and put an emphasis on math and science districtwide.

COMMON THEMES IN REFORM IMPLEMENTATION

The experiences in these districts provided several key insights into the process of systemwide reform.

First, Systemwide Reform Was a Long-Term Process Requiring Vision and Commitment.

Reform in these districts was a long-term and continuing effort. Three of the districts had been in the process of reforming for over a decade; the fourth had begun in the mid-1980s. In each case, as reform unfolded, all system components, including standards and assessments, were changed as the districts acquired more experience and monitored their success. In these districts, the superintendent was a pivotal force for the reform. Each brought considerable expertise and experience to the district and provided the vision and leadership to develop and maintain consensus in support of reform. A key factor in their success was their longevity in the district. Each began reform within a few years of coming to the district and stayed for many years.

Second, Technical Assistance Was Important.

Technical assistance was ongoing as the reforms evolved, and districts saw it as essential because of lack of time and experience among district staff. The districts hired private or university consultants to help in areas such as conducting needs assessments, setting standards, writing curricula, and developing assessment tools. Districts varied in the extent of outside assistance obtained. For example, two districts developed long-

term relationships with consultants who were directly involved in many aspects of the reform. In contrast, another relied heavily on research by district personnel but also obtained assistance from a variety of sources, mostly on a short-term basis, to provide guidance on reform and training in a variety of instructional approaches. In one case, the district used state developed curriculum frameworks, which are nationally recognized, as a starting point for developing its own standards and assessments.

Third, Teacher Support Was Critical.

Administrators saw teacher support as critical to successfully implementing reform. The districts obtained teacher support by training the teachers about the need for and process of reform; involving them in writing the new standards, curricula, and assessments; and providing training in various instructional approaches. Yet, providing necessary staff development, training, and time to work on the standards may be one of the most difficult implementation issues for reform. The districts we visited devoted considerable energy to these purposes. The four districts also used a variety of methods to provide professional development, such as staff retreats, summer workshops, and training during school hours--for which substitutes were provided to free teachers for training. Two districts established teacher centers. For example, one district established three teacher centers that provided intensive training, over a period of 5 to 8 weeks, in instructional practices and other aspects of reform. This is in marked contrast to the short-term in-service training teachers often receive.

The difficulty in maintaining professional development efforts was demonstrated in at least two districts where, as district funds became more constrained, funding for professional development was reduced. For example, one district recently had to close its teacher centers because of budget constraints, even though many teachers had not yet attended.

Fourth, Assessing Overall Progress Toward High Standards May Be Difficult.

Districts tracked the progress of reform efforts through the results of norm-referenced, standardized achievement tests. Such tests, though not directly linked to the districts' curricula and standards, are a recognized measure of student achievement in basic skills, and low scores on such tests were usually one reason reform was undertaken. Although we cannot make a causal link to the reform--because many factors affect students' test scores--students in these districts made substantial achievement gains as measured by these tests, and officials pointed to those gains as evidence of reform success.

Districts are likely to have more difficulty in measuring overall success as they incorporate new, higher standards. To measure

student progress toward these new standards, districts will need a broader range of assessment instruments, such as portfolios and demonstrations. The districts we visited were developing--and training teachers to use--these relatively new types of assessments. But aggregating results of these tests to measure progress is more difficult than using norm-referenced tests. Efforts are under way at the national and state levels to develop ways to use such assessment mechanisms beyond measuring individual student achievement, to compare achievement across, for example, districts or states.

Fifth, Current Federal Programs May Not Support Systemwide Reform.

Existing federal categorical programs, such as Chapter 1, played little part in these districts' reforms, although the districts received funding from a variety of such programs. District officials said that federal categorical programs--targeted to specific groups of at-risk students such as the disadvantaged and those with disabilities--were not supportive of reforms directed to improving achievement of all students. On the other hand, federal programs did not seem to significantly hinder reform activities.

We did not study in depth how those at-risk students who have been the traditional focus of federal programs fared under reform in the four districts we visited. However, teachers and administrators in two of the districts noted that teachers believed they were better equipped to deal with at-risk students in the regular classroom, and officials from one district pointed out that the proportion of students with disabilities that were mainstreamed had increased during the course of the reform. On the other hand, success is not guaranteed. For example, in another district, test scores of minorities improved but still lagged far behind those of nonminorities. The district was still looking for ways to improve achievement of minority students in relation to nonminorities.

The districts' use of federally funded technical assistance was mixed. Districts used systems such as the Educational Resources Information Center in researching reform issues, and the two larger districts had obtained some assistance from federally assisted centers. The two smaller districts, on the other hand, did not seek help from these types of centers and laboratories. One superintendent pointed out that his district needed on-site consultation and support and that the nearest federal laboratory was too far away to make that practical. We did not assess the extent to which federally funded research and technical assistance efforts currently support systemwide reform, or the extent to which they could do so. However, we noted some potential limitations. For example, many of the federal technical assistance centers target specific programs, such as Chapter 1 or bilingual education programs. Also, there are only 10 regional laboratories, which have and could support reforms in a more general sense than centers associated with individual programs. There are also education

research and development centers which assist school reform efforts; many focus on discrete parts of the education process, such as assessment or teacher evaluation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FEDERAL ROLE IN FOSTERING SYSTEMWIDE REFORM

Mr. Chairman, systemwide reform holds promise for improving student learning. Having key components of the education system linked together promotes monitoring of student achievement to ensure that progress continues and enables all school personnel to work together to improve student performance. Systemwide reform can accommodate a variety of instructional and administrative reforms and could provide a framework by which their success can be measured.

But, in the absence of state and federal actions, maintaining commitment and finding resources for systemwide reform may be difficult for many districts. Systemwide reform is slow, evolutionary, and continuous. It demands a great deal of time, commitment, and flexibility from its participants. Continuing reform over the years may be difficult for many districts. Frequent changes in leadership make commitment harder to maintain, and yet we know that nationally superintendent turnover is relatively high, especially in large urban districts, where the average tenure is 2 years. Also, many districts in the nation, again including many large urban districts, are facing significant financial difficulties. Finding funding and energy for reform while trying to adjust to reductions in state and local funding may make undertaking systemwide reform a more difficult task in the 1990s.

Local involvement and acceptance of the standards that drive the reform are necessary. The districts we visited were using existing standards, both the national mathematics standards and state standards, as guides but were adapting them to local curricula. The emphasis on teacher involvement also reinforces the need for local input.

In conclusion, if voluntary national standards, and related assessments, are developed, they could provide direction and serve as a starting point for district reform. But national standards and assessments alone are not likely to be sufficient to ensure systemwide reforms are undertaken or that they are compatible with the national standards. The Congress could take a variety of actions if it wishes to encourage district-level systemwide reform. For example, Congress could

-- support efforts to develop voluntary high national and state content standards and support development of exemplary assessment methods appropriate to those standards.

-- ensure availability of technical assistance and professional development to districts implementing or seeking to implement systemwide reform.

-- make existing federal categorical programs more conducive to systemwide reform by, for example, giving priority for grants to applicants serving targeted groups in the context of systemwide reform. In making these or other changes, such as those recommended by recent studies of Chapter 1, provision should be made to ensure the needs of at-risk students are met.

Congress could also direct the Secretary of Education to

-- take steps to disseminate information about successful reform efforts, and

-- review the scope and functions of the federal research centers, laboratories, and technical assistance centers to determine the extent to which they could assist in systemwide reform efforts.

In undertaking these or other actions the Congress should include federal and state governments as well as private agencies where appropriate. Further, recognizing that some districts and states are already undertaking systemwide reform in the absence of national standards, these actions should help ensure those efforts are directed toward the new, higher standards envisioned in current national standard-setting activities. Finally, although these actions are outlined in the context of encouraging district action, they are not meant to preclude federal support for state- or school-based reform.

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Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. I will be happy to answer any questions that you or members of the Subcommittee might have.

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